

Rodolphe Gasché. *Georges Bataille: Phenomenology and Phantasmatology*. Trans. Roland Végső.. Stanford University Press 2012. 352 pp. \$85.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780804776066); \$25.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780804776073).

Despite his influence on much of today's continental philosophy and literary criticism, there are relatively few important book-length studies of Georges Bataille. A dominant reason for this is undoubtedly Bataille's unorthodox treatment of philosophical problems. Like Plato, Bataille presents his readers with provocative texts that belie a surface reading and demand an ability to shift between levels of interpretation to discern one image from its reversed counterpart. However, Bataille is utterly unlike Plato in refusing Plato's good-natured eroticism of flirtation—sinking immediately into the obscene, the bestial, and the entropic. What would it mean to philosophize in this utterly non-Platonic manner, and what is accomplished by it?

Rodolphe Gasché's text is an audacious and strenuous attempt to lift a reading of Bataille's works past the shock of obscenity and into a larger philosophical continuum. As a book of philosophy, a traditional philosophical study of Bataille's *oeuvre*, it is a rigorous and demanding enterprise and certainly not for those new to Bataille's work or the philosophical lineage that Gasché invokes. Nevertheless, this is an important work. Readers prepared or willing to work through interpretations of heterogeneous elements such as Schelling's work on mythologies and Freud's and Nietzsche's disparate takes on the 'primal urge' will find their understanding of those concepts and of Bataille enriched. Indeed, Gasché's study of Schelling's 'philosophy of mythology' tucked into the first chapter might be one of the best available on the topic (32-77). But as a book on Bataille, the text seems to deliberately enact a displacement of knowledge with regard to Bataille's texts with the same rigor and effort that it uses to explicate his works. Thus, although it is easy to sum up the disparate elements of Gasché's study, drawing a concrete science of phantasms from it – as the work appears to promise – seems untenable (286). One likely contributor to this is the fact that the book was composed from 1974-75, edited in 1978 for publication in Germany, and edited and revised again for this edition. The other contributor, however, is Gasché's interpretation of Bataille's subversive philosophical approach, which 'is led by an economy of interpretation that renounces every profit (every extraction of meaning) that would come in the form of a surplus value from an investment of labor' (6). The movements of Bataille's texts in their creation will be just as important, if not more so, than the meaning produced.

Bataille's larger project, as Gasché interprets it, aims not just at a critique of humanism or of philosophical anthropology, as is often held, but at the very logic that underpins both. This is a critique in its Kantian sense, paradigmatically demonstrated with regard to its logic by Hegel, which Bataille reads as being an intellectual prison: 'The constraint of the system [of logic], which is the result of an imperial Idea installed in the center, makes every intellectual construction into a prison' (240). Gasché's thesis is that Bataille breaks from this prison by producing a dark 'double of [Hegel's] phenomenology' through a long study of the figures that the Hegelian system cannot recapture and must repress (xvii). These concepts, and Gasché insists that Bataille utilizes them as such, form the basis of the three main chapters of the book: myth; image; and sign. However, none of these concepts is exactly as they seem or as Hegel would see them. Instead, Gasché demonstrates, for Bataille, each to be working from within the Hegelian system against that very system. Gasché

does this by sending each chapter off on a detour into considerations of readings of myth, image, and sign which cannot be recuperated within Hegel's logic without turning that logic against itself.

The chapter on mythological representation begins with an invocation of Schelling's long project of a philosophy of mythology and is a natural fit in challenging the Hegelian reading of myth, which would subsume all myth into the conceptual field of philosophy. Gasché draws out the ramifications of Schelling's concept of the *katabolē*, which essentially functions as a guarantor of the meaningfulness of myth itself against Hegel's attempted divestment of the 'sensuous shell' of myth into the formal thought characteristic of philosophy (35-6). Gasché argues convincingly that Bataille's concept of mythological anthropology, garnered from early versions of 'The Pineal Eye', follows the kind of logic Schelling employs in deducing at the origin of myth the *katabolē*, or the abyssal suppression of that which is unmasterable by thought (74). The difficulty in philosophizing in the manner of Bataille, while writing or reading, lies in Bataille taking his point of origin in the *katabolē*: '[H]is writings position themselves "immediately" in those unthought and unthinkable openings of all philosophy that make its discourse possible' (76). Thus, the problem of mythological representation opens up the always infinitely suppressed and suppressing movement that allows philosophy to raise itself in mastery. In opposition to Hegelian teleological impulses, Gasché and Bataille are nomadically moving 'in the domain of [Schelling's] barbaric philosophy' (77).

The second chapter traces the ramifications of this *katabolē* to the philosophical image. The image's simultaneous showing of what is and its illusory copy, a status held since Plato's dialogues, stands as another site of contestation with the Hegelian logic: 'Since it is a compromise rather than a concept, the intuitive nature of the image will be gradually eliminated through the symbolic and sign producing fantasy' (117). Gasché's usage of 'compromise' here in describing Hegel's logic is important, as it signals a Freudian interpretation of Bataille's 'image'. The image is that which philosophy must displace, repress, in order to erect knowing. Bataille's perpetual invocation of a series of images serves to demonstrate and displace this necessity in traditional philosophical logic. Whether in Plato's cave or in Hegel's pit, the image serves only to displace itself and be replaced by the clear light of the concept, whereas Bataille seeks the 'perverted speculation' of that repressed series of images (157).

The remainder of the book – chapters three, four, and a short fifth chapter – take Bataille's rereading of Hegel directly to the *Phenomenology*. Gasché reads Bataille's insistence on 'remorseless parricide' as a philosophical activity as an undoing of the master/slave dialectic or, at least, as its irresolvable residue (184). Only in this way can philosophy lose its obsession, whether overt or repressed, of gaining mastery over the beings it claims to know. Gasché passes this reading through a Freudian/Nietzschean lens, asserting that Bataille, like so many philosophers before him, thinks the 'tragic image of the world...which had become annihilated by the monolithic severity of the one principle, the one origin, and linear rigidity' (205). In other words, Bataille seeks the re-eruption of the tragic world in the disparate elements of the *Phenomenology* which cannot be integrated into Spirit: myth; image; and sign; and he accomplishes this from within the *Phenomenology* itself by dwelling at the level of the negativity which cannot be abolished or made productive.

Gasché notes the main difficulty of this reading of Bataille (and Hegel) in its possibility in resolving itself into a 'negative teleology' which remains against Hegel but yet still within Hegel's logic (262). Although he attempts to answer this in similar ways to the manner in which Derrida's

criticisms of Hegel do, the structure of the book is perhaps his best reply. Gasché's book *about* Bataille is perhaps best understood as a book *with* Bataille, and this method of philosophizing can less be described than produced or undergone. Readers prepared for this ordeal, in the sense of an initiation, will, paradoxically, find many things to build on in Gasché's book.

Darin S. McGinnis, Wheeling Jesuit University